

Getting Your Five a Day...in Aruba?



Photography by Steve Keith
Text by Debbie Kunder

Aruba...we all know it as that tiny Caribbean island, where the sun is always shining and refreshing breezes are always blowing. We know it as the perfect destination for gorgeous blond beaches that hug crystalline turquoise waters; a mecca of great restaurants, shopping, and watersports; and home to friendly, accommodating locals. We also tend to think of Aruba as a barren desert island where nothing grows except for cacti, aloes, and acacias. Locally grown fruits and vegetables? Unthinkable! This conception is perpetuated by sources like Wikipedia, which puts forth that “Unlike much of the Caribbean region, Aruba has a dry climate and an arid, cactus-strewn landscape.” But let’s just cut to the chase here—this conception is a misconception.

In the 13 years that I have lived in Aruba, I’ve enjoyed coconuts and local cherries from my own backyard, as well as plenty of mangoes that have fortuitously fallen into my yard from my neighbor’s tree. (These are not your insipid, supermarket-variety mangoes—although somewhat fibrous, they are aromatic and flavorful.) I have also enjoyed snapping off a tamarind pod here and there from the tamarind tree growing wild in the park close to my

house, delighting in its sweet-and-sour pulp. I’ve been given gifts of bunches of quenepa fruit, whose thin, tight skins are so satisfying to pierce. And my little papillon serves as the “Johnny Almondseed” of the neighborhood, picking up an almond fruit that has fallen from our almond tree at the beginning of each walk, and then absentmindedly leaving it at a neighbor’s gate in order to yap at another dog three times his size.

But I’m just a mere immigrant...what do I really know? To get the real scoop, I started with a visit to Santa Rosa, home of Aruba’s Department of Agriculture, Husbandry, and Fisheries. There, horticulturalist Tilo Damian took a trip down memory lane as he described to me the various edibles he would pilfer as a youngster from people’s yards on his walk home from school, including quenepa, guava, pomegranate, soursop, and purple mombin. He then helped me track down THE expert on the different fruits growing naturally in Aruba—96-year-old Isaac Chin. Born in Guyana and raised in Trinidad, Isaac grew up among fruit trees; in fact, fruits were part of his survival. When he moved to Aruba in his later years, he surrounded himself with a wide variety of fruit trees on his little

plot of land in Balashi, enabling him to relive his cherished boyhood. (Although Isaac no longer has as many fruit trees as he once had, his land still produces mangoes, rose apples, medlars, guavas, jujubes, purple mombins, sweet tamarind fruits, quenepas, and sugar apples.)

In time, Isaac became an expert on local fruits, writing Aruba’s first real catalog of fruits on the island, *Galaxy of Fruits Aruba Grows*. That misconception that Aruba is a sterile hunk of land? Isaac emphatically blows it out of the water, documenting about 50 different fruits that grow here. Isaac also wrote the book to “reawaken consciousness of a charming feature of Aruba which is fast disappearing”—namely, the picking, eating, and enjoyment of these “backyard” fruits. In the spirit of Isaac’s mission, I profiled a handful of Aruba’s fruits (and one veggie), and to keep things interesting, I chose fruits that are less familiar to us North Americans. Some of them even tout some rather impressive health benefits. (Perhaps we should start a list of Aruba’s “superfoods!”) One thing’s for sure—if you get the chance to try them while vacationing on this not-so-barren island, please do! Isaac would certainly approve.



Quenepa or Spanish Lime (*Kenepa*)

The first time I tried a quenepa (kenepa) in Aruba, I was reminded of the lychees that I ate by the bag in Thailand. In fact, the fruit is often described as a cross between a lychee and a lime. The traditional way to eat a quenepa is to bite into the brittle skin to separate the fruit from its covering; then pop the fruit in your mouth and work the sweet, juicy, jelly-like pulp off the seed. This process of eating the quenepa is almost as enjoyable as the fruit itself. Unfortunately, picking bunches of quenepa from the tree isn’t so easy, since the tree can reach as high as 30 meters. A ladder may be in order! As for health benefits, quenepa contains vitamins A and C, calcium, phosphorus, tryptophan, and lysine.

Aruba Cherry (*Shimarucu*)

The Aruba cherry, also called the Barbados cherry and the West Indian cherry, is known locally as the shimarucu. It is very different from the cherries you buy at the grocery store. Some people find the shimarucu to be too sour, but I love the juicy, soft, sweetish-tart flesh. After I found out that one single shimarucu packs the minimum daily requirement of Vitamin C, I started popping these little vitamin bombs like candy, grabbing a handful each time I passed the bush that grows rather happily in my yard. The shimarucu does have a pithy center, but you can just spit it out.



Noni

According to Isaac, noni trees can be found in the backyards of many locals. Indeed, our editor in chief has a noni on her property. When I asked her what it tastes like, she simply replied, “Yuck.” Ok, so why would anyone eat this yucky fruit? Well, it turns out noni is touted as an amazing cure-all for a limitless number of ailments. I’m personally a bit dubious about such sweeping health claims, but I’m sure we could all benefit from the whopping doses of potassium, iron, calcium, and antioxidants (including vitamin C) that noni delivers. Most commonly, noni is turned into juice, either raw or fermented. This juice can be perfectly disguised in a glass of some other (more palatable) juice!



Moringa (*Merengue*)

Have you heard of moringa yet? If not, you will soon—it’s the newest “superfood” (move aside, kale). Back home, you might have seen it sold in stores as a supplement or powder (so it can be mixed into smoothies, for example), but here in Aruba, moringa (merengue) grows wild—all over the place! The leaves are the most nutritious part of the plant, containing 9 essential amino acids, 27 vitamins, 46 antioxidants, and many minerals. Gram for gram, it has two times the protein in yogurt, four times the vitamin A of carrots, three times the potassium of bananas, four times the calcium of milk, and seven times the vitamin C of oranges. My best friend in Aruba has a moringa tree at her school, and she and her students eat the moringa leaves straight from the tree. “They taste like peanuts,” she informs. You can also put the leaves in a salad or cook them as you would spinach. In some countries, the pods are eaten, usually stewed or curried.



Purple Mombin (*Makapruim*)

In Aruba, the purple mombin is known as the makapruim. The yellow flesh of the fruit is crunchy, somewhat dry, and semisweet. The ripe fruits are commonly eaten out-of-hand, with or without the skin. They can also be stewed whole with sugar and consumed as a dessert or made into preserves. Note that the variety sold in supermarkets in Aruba hails from Venezuela.



Sea Grape (*Druifi di Laman*)

Wind-resistant and highly tolerant of salt, the sea grape (druifi di laman) plant is ideally suited for Aruba. The grapes grow in beautiful bunches, turning deep purple when ripe. Tasty and sweet (with a little sour), they can be eaten directly from the plant, but I hope you're not too hungry, because the pit takes up most of the fruit's volume. The fruits can also be made into jellies and jams or fermented into sea grape wine. In Aruba, local vintner Vincente Kock makes wine from his own sea grapes, bottling it under the label Vino Vince.



Mispel

My first mispel came from the tree in my friend's yard. She had been using them in her morning smoothies. I decided to do the same, but not before trying some straight. Cutting into the sandpapery skin revealed a soft and juicy light-brown flesh. I quite enjoyed the grainy texture, which mimics that of a ripe pear. The flavor is also pear-like, perhaps a bit more malty. As for the level of sweetness? Off the charts! Yes, it was even a bit too sweet for my (very) sweet tooth, but it turned out to be the perfect natural sweetener for my smoothie (and a natural laxative!).

Interestingly, the sap from the mispel tree's bark is used in making chewing gum. When an unripe fruit is picked, this white sap is released from the stem. A fully ripened fruit has saggy skin and does not release this sap when picked.



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Cashew (*Casho*)

The first time I saw a cashew (*casho*) “fruit” in Aruba, my mind was blown. *That’s where a cashew nut comes from?!?! The pear-shaped upper part, which is attached to the stalk, is known as the cashew apple. High in vitamin C, it’s refreshing and juicy, although a bit astringent, leaving a furry feeling in your mouth. It’s often squeezed to make a juice. Interestingly, the cashew apple is not the actual fruit of the cashew tree. The true fruit of the tree is the boxing-glove-shaped drupe that grows at the end of the cashew apple. Inside of the drupe is the cashew seed—what we commonly call the cashew nut. Even more interesting is that the seed is surrounded by a double shell containing anacardic acid. This means that if you try shelling a raw cashew, you’re going to get a nasty burn. Roasting is the preferred method to destroy the toxin before the nut is shelled.*

Soursop (*Sorsaka*)

I first became acquainted with this fruit when I was learning Papiamentu (Aruba’s native language) from a little textbook. According to the book, sorsaka was the local name for soursop. I remember thinking,



what the heck is soursop? Soursop is a fruit that looks like a green, prickly mango and has white, juicy, soft, tart flesh. I rather like the taste description provided by Wikipedia: “The flavor has been described as a combination of strawberry and pineapple, with sour citrus flavor notes contrasting with an underlying creamy flavor reminiscent of coconut or banana.” It is reported that soursop is a natural cancer killer, 10,000



This image provided by Santa Rosa

times stronger than chemotherapy, although this claim has not been proven. Isaac recommends making it into a smoothie or juice with milk and sugar rather than eating it raw. ¶

I’d like to thank Isaac Chin for allowing me to use his beautiful book in the writing of this article. I hope that I have done justice to his mission of encouraging people to try and enjoy Aruba’s “backyard” fruits.